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## AP-NORC Poll: Americans say holiday gifts harder to afford



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A shopper leaves the Macy's store, Saturday, Dec. 10, 2022, at Downtown Crossing in Boston. Associated Press



Artisanal doll "Miss Aruba" returned to its home island

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## Coral disease affecting Aruba causing concern



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## AP-NORC Poll: Americans say holiday gifts harder to afford

By **DEE-ANN DURBIN**  
AP Business Writer

More than half of U.S. adults say it's harder to afford the holiday gifts they want to give this year.

Sixty-nine percent of them say they have seen higher prices for holiday gifts in recent months, up from 58% last year, according to a new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. And 57% say it has been harder to afford the things they want to give, a dramatic increase from 40% one year ago. The vast majority of those finding it harder to afford gifts say they've cut back on giving as a result.

Last year, 89-year-old Darlene Huffman used some of her government stimulus money to buy KitchenAid food choppers — which cost around \$40 — for her six children. But this year, with the price of gas, groceries and other basics eating into her limited income, Huffman is downsizing. She plans to buy them each a \$10 trash can that attaches to the backseat of a car.

"I have to watch my p's and q's. But God has supplied all my needs and I'm not complaining," said Huffman, who will spend much of the season volunteering at food and clothing banks in her hometown of Greenville, Ohio.



People carry shopping bags on Saturday, Dec. 10, 2022 at Downtown Crossing in Boston.

Associated Press

U.S. inflation appears to be cooling; consumer prices fell for the fifth straight month in November, the government said Tuesday. But prices were still 7.1% higher than a year earlier, an increase felt most acutely by low-income households.

About two-thirds of Americans in households earning less than \$50,000 annually say they've had a harder time affording gifts and food for holiday meals this year, according to the AP-NORC poll. About 6 in 10 of those in households earning between \$50,000 and \$99,999 found it harder to

afford gifts and food, along with half of higher-income households.

Roslyn Coble doesn't plan to buy holiday gifts this year. Coble, 63, lives on monthly disability checks and has struggled with higher prices for food and other necessities this year.

"I'm less interested in going out and trying to buy things," said Coble, of Oakboro, North Carolina. "I'm not as much into it this year."

Coble is looking forward to spending the holidays with family. And she's expecting a small raise in her disability payments in January.

"Next Christmas I'll be able to do more," she said.

The poll shows nearly all Americans — 95% — have seen higher-than-usual prices for groceries in recent months, up from 85% last year, according to the poll. The U.S. government estimates food prices will be up 9.5% to 10.5% this year; historically, they've risen only 2% annually.

Eighty-three percent said they had experienced inflationary gas prices, about the same number as last year. Seventy-four percent reported higher electricity bills, up from 57% last year. As a result, many buyers

may be looking for discounts this year, and retailers are likely to respond. The average discount rate across all categories online was 31% on Thanksgiving, up from 27% last year, according to Salesforce.

Tierra Tucker, a 34-year-old day care worker in Chicago, said she's been shopping since Black Friday for her twin 13-year-old daughters and has found deals on many of the gifts they're getting, including iPads, purses, clothes and bracelet-making kits.

Tucker hasn't cut back on gifts for her daughters this year, but she won't be spending as much on others. Tucker recently moved and said she has had to focus on getting things for her new house. So her seven nieces and nephews will get gift cards instead of toys. Overall U.S. holiday sales are expected to grow at a slower pace than last year. The National Retail Federation, the largest retail trade group, expects holiday sales to grow 6% to 8% this year, down from 13.5% in 2021.

Daniel Reyes, a postal worker from Midland, Texas, said he made more money than usual this year thanks to overtime. But he's still thinking twice about what he buys in the face of steep price increases and losses to his 401(k) plan. □



The Capitol is seen in Washington, early Wednesday, Dec. 14, 2022.

Associated Press

By **KEVIN FREKING**  
Associated Press

**WASHINGTON (AP)** — Lawmakers leading the negotiations on a bill to fund the federal government

for the current fiscal year announced late Tuesday they've reached agreement on a "framework" that should allow them to complete work on the bill over

## Lawmakers announce 'framework' on bill to keep gov't open

the next week and avoid a government shutdown.

Congress faces a midnight Friday deadline to pass a spending bill to prevent a partial government shutdown. The two chambers are expected to pass another short-term measure before then to keep the government running through Dec. 23, which will allow negotiators time to complete work on the full-year bill.

"Now, the House and Senate Appropriations Committees will work around the clock to negotiate the details of final 2023 spend-

ing bills that can be supported by the House and Senate and receive President Biden's signature," said Rep. Rosa DeLauro of Connecticut, the Democratic chair of the House Appropriations Committee. Earlier in the day, Senate leaders said lawmakers from the two parties were nearing an agreement, but Republicans warned Democrats that lawmakers would need to complete their work by Dec. 22 or they would only support a short-term extension into early next year.

That would give House Re-

publicans more leverage over what's in the legislation, since they will be in the majority then.

Sen. Richard Shelby, R-Ala., said last week that the two parties were about \$25 billion apart in what is expected to be about a \$1.65 trillion package, not including mandatory spending on programs such as Social Security and Medicare. However, Democrats in their statements did not indicate what topline spending number had been reached in the framework announced Tuesday. □

## U.S. deaths fell this year, but not to pre-COVID levels

By **MIKE STOBBE**  
AP Medical Writer

**NEW YORK (AP)** — The number of U.S. deaths dropped this year, but there are still more than there were before the coronavirus hit.

Preliminary data — through the first 11 months of the year — indicates 2022 will see fewer deaths than the previous two COVID-19 pandemic years. Current reports suggest deaths may be down about 3% from 2020 and about 7% vs. 2021.

U.S. deaths usually rise year-to-year, in part because the nation's population has been growing. The pandemic accelerated that trend, making last year the deadliest in U.S. history, with more than 3.4 million dying. If current trends continue, this year will mark the first annual decline in deaths since 2009.

It will be months before health officials have a full tally. The October and November numbers are not yet complete and a late-December surge could change the final picture, said Farida Ahmad, who leads mortality surveillance at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

If the decline does hold, it will still be a far cry from where the nation was before the coronavirus appeared. This year's count is



A visitor sits on a bench to look artist Suzanne Brennan Firstenberg's "In America: Remember," a temporary art installation made up of white flags to commemorate Americans who have died of COVID-19, on the National Mall in Washington on Oct. 2, 2021.

likely to end up at least 13% higher than what it was in 2019.

"We're (still) definitely worse off than we were before the pandemic," said Amira Roess, a George Mason University professor of epidemiology and global health.

Once again, most of the annual change is due to the ebb and flow of COVID-19, which has killed more than 1,080,000 Americans since it first was recognized in the U.S. in early 2020.

This year started off horribly,

with about 73,000 COVID deaths in January alone — the third deadliest month from COVID-19 since the pandemic began. For 2022, "the bulk of mortality was concentrated during that omicron wave at the beginning of the year," said Iliya Gutin, a University of Texas researcher tracking COVID-19 mortality.

Monthly COVID-19 deaths dropped below 4,000 in April and averaged about 16,000 per month through November. The monthly average for 2021 was more

than double that. COVID-19 will nevertheless end up as the nation's third leading cause of death this year, just as it was in 2020 and 2021 — behind the perennial leader, heart disease, and cancer.

Heart disease deaths, which have tended to surge in tandem with COVID-19 deaths, are on track to be down from 2021, Ahmad said. And it's not clear whether the number of cancer deaths will change, based on preliminary data. There may be some rela-

Associated Press

tively good news regarding drug overdose deaths, which hit an all-time high last year. Provisional overdose death data posted by the CDC on Wednesday — through the first seven months of this year — suggests overdose deaths stopped climbing early this year, around last winter's end.

Also Wednesday, the CDC released its first report on deaths involving long COVID — long-term symptoms after a person has recovered from coronavirus infection. The CDC estimates that about 3,500 deaths from January 2020 through June 2022 involved long COVID. That's about 1% of deaths in which COVID was deemed the underlying or contributing cause.

Experts believe pharmaceutical weapons against the coronavirus have been making a difference. The Commonwealth Fund this week released a modeling study that concluded the U.S. COVID-19 vaccination program prevented more than 3.2 million deaths.

"We all really would expect that the number of deaths — and the number of severe cases — would decrease, due to a combination of immunity from natural infection and vaccination ... and treatment," Roess said. □

## Trump Org. was secretly held in contempt for hindering probe

By **MICHAEL R. SISAK**  
Associated Press

**NEW YORK (AP)** — Donald Trump's company impeded a grand jury investigation last year by repeatedly failing to turn over evidence in a timely fashion, leading to a secret contempt finding and a \$4,000 fine, according to court records made public Tuesday.

The Trump Organization was found to have been "willfully disobeying" four grand jury subpoenas and three court orders, to the detriment of Manhattan prosecutors who were left ill-prepared to question witnesses, Judge Juan Manuel

Merchan ruled.

The subpoenas, issued in March, April, May and June 2021, preceded the Trump Organization's July 2021 indictment on criminal tax fraud charges for helping executives avoid taxes on company-paid perks. The company was convicted this month and faces a fine of up to \$1.6 million.

The \$4,000 contempt fine was the maximum allowable by law.

It's yet another kerfuffle involving Trump and allegations of mishandling or withholding records. In April, a judge held Trump in contempt and fined him

\$110,000 for being slow to respond to a civil subpoena issued by New York's attorney general. The former president has also been under investigation for storing classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida. Merchan vaguely referenced the Trump Organization's contempt proceeding while presiding over the company's criminal trial, saying he would wait until after it was over to unseal records related to an unspecified proceeding held last year.

That proceeding turned out to be the Trump Organization's closed-door



Former President Donald Trump announces a third run for president as he speaks at Mar-a-Lago in Palm Beach, Fla., Nov. 15, 2022.

Associated Press

contempt trial on Oct. 7, 2021 and Merchan's partially redacted 28-page ruling finding the company in contempt, which he issued on Dec. 8, 2021.

While the company's

name was blacked out in the court record released Tuesday, the details in the decision and the manner in which it was unsealed by the judge made it clear who was involved. □

# U.S. storm brings tornadoes, blizzard-like conditions; 2 dead

By **JAKE BLEIBERG** and **KEVIN MCGILL**

**Associated Press**

**KEITHSVILLE, La. (AP)** — A volatile storm ripping across the U.S. spawned tornadoes that killed a young boy and his mother in Louisiana, smashed mobile homes and chicken houses in Mississippi and threatened neighboring Southern states with more punishing weather Wednesday.

To the north, the huge storm system delivered blizzard-like conditions to the Great Plains and was expected to push more snow and ice into Appalachia and New England. The wintry blast dumped more than 2 feet (61 centimeters) of snow in parts of South Dakota.

In northern Louisiana, it took hours for authorities to find the bodies of a mother and child reported missing after a tornado struck the rural Keithville community near Shreveport on Tuesday afternoon.

The Caddo Parish Coroner's Office said the body of 8-year-old Nikolus Little was found around 11 p.m. Tuesday in a wooded area. His mother, Yoshiko A. Smith, 30, was found dead under storm debris around 2:30 a.m. Wednesday.

Sheriff Steve Prator said their home was destroyed and the boy ended up a half-mile away, while his mother's body was discov-



Crews survey damage from a possible tornado in Grapevine, Texas, Tuesday, Dec. 13, 2022.

**Associated Press**

ered one street over from where their mobile home stood. When deputies arrived at their address, they found nothing but a concrete slab, said sheriff's Sgt. Casey Jones.

"I wouldn't even know if they knew a house was there to begin with," Jones told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

The forecast Wednesday called for more severe storms with additional tornadoes expected across an area of the Gulf Coast region populated by nearly 3 million people from New Orleans to Mobile,

Alabama. More damaging weather was possible in the Florida panhandle.

A steady stream of tornado warnings were issued Wednesday across portions of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. In Keithville, Louisiana, where the two deaths occurred, sheriff's deputies restricted access to the area where the suspected tornado touched down. Downed trees, some that appeared to be ripped up by their roots, littered the landscape. Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards planned to tour the area Wednesday afternoon.

"I am heartbroken to learn of the mother and child who were killed in Southwest Caddo Parish due to one of numerous reported tornadoes," Edwards said in a statement as he declared a state of emergency Wednesday, saying at least six tornadoes had touched down in several parishes.

In Union Parish, on Louisiana's northern border with Arkansas, Farmerville Mayor John Crow said a Tuesday night tornado badly damaged an apartment complex where 50 families lived and wiped out

a neighboring trailer park with about 10 homes. "It happened quick," Crow said Wednesday, adding that about 30 homes were damaged along nearby Lake D'Arbonne.

Shannon Futch, Union Parish's emergency director, said there were reports of numerous people treated for cuts and bruises and at least two people hospitalized after a twister cut a swath of damage about 5 miles (8 kilometers) long, toppling trees onto about a dozen houses.

"Some people even stayed the night in their houses that had big pine trees on them," Futch said. "They didn't have anywhere to go."

A suspected tornado reported in New Iberia in southwest Louisiana damaged several buildings on the campus of New Iberia Medical Center, hospital officials said, and left five people with minor injuries.

In neighboring Mississippi, suspected tornado destroyed four large chicken houses one of which held 5,000 roosters in Rankin County, Mississippi, Sheriff Bryan Bailey said. Mobile homes at a park in Sharkey County, Mississippi, were reduced to piles of shredded debris. Resident Leslie Jackson told WLBT-TV her home was one of only a couple left standing. □

## Census Bureau tables controversial privacy tool for survey

By **MIKE SCHNEIDER**

**Associated Press**

The U.S. Census Bureau on Wednesday said it was putting on hold plans to apply by 2025 a controversial method for protecting the privacy of participants in its most comprehensive survey of Americans after facing pushback from prominent researchers and demographers.

The science doesn't yet exist to apply differential privacy algorithms to the annual American Community Survey, which covers more

than 40 topics ranging from income, internet access, rent, disabilities and language spoken at home, the statistical agency said in a blog post.

"It's also not clear that differential privacy would ultimately be the best option," wrote Donna Daily, chief of the American Community Survey Office. The Census Bureau embraced using differential privacy algorithms for the first time with the release last year of the first round of 2020 census data, and it had said the

method would be applied to American Community Survey data by 2025. Differential privacy algorithms add intentional errors to data to obscure the identity of any given participant. It is most noticeable at the smallest geographies, such as census blocks.

Prominent demographers and other researchers had asked in a letter to Census Bureau Director Robert Santos last summer that the agency drop plans to use the algorithms on future data releases, claiming it

would jeopardize the usability of numbers that are the foundation of the nation's data infrastructure. The 2020 census questionnaire asked limited questions about race, Hispanic background, sex, age, household relationships and whether a home is owned or rented during the head count of very U.S. resident. The American Community Survey, on the other hand, is much more complex because of the almost four dozen topics it covers when sampling residents in

3.5 million homes.

The Census Bureau has said that the differential privacy algorithms are needed since, without them, the growth of easily available third-party data combined with modern computing could allow hackers to piece together the identities of participants in its censuses and surveys in violation of the law. Bureau statisticians will continue to study privacy methods for the American Community Survey, the statistical agency said. □

# EU to U.S.: We already have war, don't give us trade war, too

By RAF CASERT  
Associated Press

**BRUSSELS (AP)** — Disappointment has set in two years after the election of U.S. President Joe Biden was supposed to reset trans-Atlantic relations with the European Union. EU leaders are openly talking about fights, not only friendship.

They say conflict with Washington is the last thing they want, with war raging on their doorstep in Ukraine and common resolve essential in stopping Russia. But money is a threat to that unity.

"We already have war in Europe. The last thing we need is a trade war," European Commission Vice President Margrethe Vestager told lawmakers Wednesday.

They were debating U.S. policies that many in the 27-nation bloc see as unfairly locking a longstanding and trusted ally out of the lucrative American

market. The point of contention is the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act, a \$369 billion plan that favors American-made climate technology through subsidies and, according to the EU, will unfairly discriminate against its firms.

The trans-Atlantic partners have long prided themselves on free trade unfettered by excessive subsidies and protectionism, and the law felt to Brussels like Washington betraying the spirit of fair competition. "Elements of the IRA risk unleveling the playing field and discriminating against European companies," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen wrote to the EU leaders on the eve of their year-end summit.

While trans-Atlantic relations should cement their alliance as they face Russia and an ever more assertive China, there are plenty of hints of widening division. It is all the more surprising



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, left, speaks with Greece's Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, second right, and Netherland's Prime Minister Mark Rutte, center, during a round table meeting at the EU-ASEAN summit in Brussels, Wednesday, Dec. 14, 2022.

Associated Press

because European leaders welcomed Biden's arrival two years ago as a return to warm relations and mutual commitments after four years of fractious ties under Donald Trump.

Trade disputes have been a red line for decades in trans-Atlantic relations, highlighted by fights over aircraft subsidies and steel exports and affecting everything from hormone-

treated beef to liquor exports.

Planned subsidies under the Inflation Reduction Act passed by the U.S. Congress in August are especially grating for the EU. For example, electric car buyers are eligible for a tax credit of up to \$7,500 as long as the vehicle runs on a battery built in North America with minerals mined or recycled on the continent. □

# People of Ukraine handed EU's top human rights prize

**STRASBOURG, France (AP)**

— The people of Ukraine and their representatives were handed the European Union's top human rights prize Wednesday for their resistance to Russia's invasion and defiance during the ongoing war.

The 27-nation bloc awarded the "brave people of Ukraine" the prize in October. Yulia Pajevska, founder of the medical evacuation unit Angels of Taira, human rights activist Oleksandra Matviichuk and Ivan Fedorov, mayor of the occupied city of Melitopol, were on hand to receive it during a solemn ceremony in Strasbourg, France.

"We have witnessed the inspiring resistance of ordinary citizens making the ultimate sacrifice to delay a column of tanks, senior citizens standing up to face down Russian troops with nothing but pride as their weapons. Brave women

forced to give birth in underground metro stations,"

said European Parliament President Roberta Metsola.



From left to right, head of the Mission of Ukraine to the EU Vsevolod Chentsov, State Emergency Services of Ukraine Stanislav Kulykivskiy, Mayor of Ukrainian city of Melitopol Ivan Fedorov, Founder of the medical evacuation unit Angels of Taira Yulia Paevska, Nobel Peace Prize winner and head of Center for Civil Liberties Oleksandra Matviichuk, Spokesperson of the Yellow Ribbon Civil Resistance Movement Yaroslav Bozhko and Director of the Department for emergency prevention, State Emergency Services of Ukraine Oleksandr Chekryhin, pose with European Parliament President Roberta Metsola, third from right, after receiving the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought Award, the European Union top human rights prize, Wednesday, Dec. 14, 2022 in Strasbourg, eastern France.

Associated Press

"To these people, the message from Europe has been clear. We stand with Ukraine. We will not look away," she said.

The EU award, named for Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov, was created in 1988 to honor individuals or groups who defend human rights and fundamental freedoms. Sakharov, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, died in 1989.

It's the second straight year EU lawmakers used the Sakharov Prize to send a message to the Kremlin. Imprisoned Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny won it last year. The defiance of Ukrainians during the nearly 10-month-old war has persisted despite an uptick in attacks in recent weeks. Ukrainian forces have reclaimed broad swaths of the country, dealing a blow to Russia's military prestige, since launching a counter-offensive in late August. □

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# Costa Rica tightens overwhelmed asylum system

By **JAVIER CORDOBA**

**Associated Press**

**SAN JOSE, Costa Rica (AP)**

— Costa Rica, one of the world's great refuges for people fleeing persecution, is tightening its generous asylum policies in the face of an overwhelmed system.

President Rodrigo Chaves, who took office in May, said Costa Rica's system is being abused by economic migrants. The changes he decreed took effect this month.

Despite having only 5 million citizens, the Central American country trailed only the United States, Germany and Mexico in the number of asylum applications it received last year, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Chaves first warned of the changes last month during a sudden influx of Venezuelan migrants stranded by a change in U.S. border policy. But it is Nicaraguans who account for nearly nine out of 10 of the applicants.

"The (immigration agency) tells us that 90% or more of the people don't qual-



**Venezuelan migrant Carlos Rivas, left, sells sweets on a street in Heredia, Costa Rica, Tuesday, Dec. 6, 2022.**

ify, so we are allowing the good cause of asylum to be abused by hundreds of thousands of people it's that easy," Chaves said.

The president complained that Costa Rica has been spending \$300 million a year to attend to the asylum seekers, draining resources for health and education, and international

support has been insufficient.

The United Nations said that its International Organization for Migration and High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR, had disbursed \$94 million since 2018 to support migrants and asylum seekers in Costa Rica.

The exodus from neigh-

boring Nicaragua, amid a brutal crackdown on popular protests there in 2018, swamped the asylum system long before Venezuelans became a visible presence in the streets of San Jose.

The arrival of Nicaraguans accelerated last year as President Daniel Ortega's government cracked

down on political opponents ahead of national elections. Ortega coasted to a fourth consecutive term after potential challengers were locked up. Arrests have continued this year, targeting critical nongovernmental organizations, press outlets and clergy.

In 2012, Costa Rica received barely 900 asylum applications. In 2018, that number reached nearly 28,000. And through September of this year, it was already more than 67,000. Now there are more than 220,000 pending applications to resolve.

Aiming to unclog the system, the government has also created a special immigration category for people from Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela -- nationals who make up 96% of the asylum seekers. They would be eligible for a two-year work permit in exchange for dropping their asylum cases, if they weren't really in danger.

This, of course, would likely make them ineligible for asylum in other countries, including the United States. □

**Associated Press**

# Dutch court rejects challenge to assisted suicide ban

By **MIKE CORDER**

**Associated Press**

**THE HAGUE, Netherlands**

**(AP)** — A Dutch court on Wednesday upheld the Netherlands' ban on assisted suicide, a setback for activists who said the prohibition infringes on their right to determine when their lives end. The Hague District Court rejected the activists' argument that the ban violated the European Convention on Human Rights.

The "right to decide for oneself about one's own end of life is indeed protected" by the convention, the court said in a written statement.

"However, this right to self-determination does not go so far that there is also a right to obtain assisted

suicide." Frits Spangenberg, chairperson of the group Cooperative Last Will, which brought the case along with 29 individual plaintiffs, said he was disappointed by the ruling, but vowed to fight on. He said he would study the decision with lawyers before deciding whether to appeal.

"I'm not surprised, but I'd hoped for more perspective," Spangenberg said in a telephone interview.

The government did not react to the ruling.

The Netherlands was the first nation to legalize euthanasia.

A 2002 law allowed physicians to end the lives of patients under strict conditions, either by administering a fatal dose of drugs

or giving the patient the drugs to take. Assisted suicide, the practice of someone who is not a physician providing a person with a self-administered lethal substance, remains illegal.

The Hague court said the euthanasia law "properly weighed up the various interests" of "on the one hand the social interest of protecting life and protecting vulnerable persons, and on the other the interest of those seeking assisted suicide."

But it noted that the conditions that must be met for a physician to perform euthanasia mean "not everyone who considers their life complete will be able to receive assisted suicide."

Spangenberg said that finding "does not do jus-



**Campaigners take their hats off in a show of respect for people who took their own lives in The Hague, Netherlands, on Oct. 10, 2022.**

**Associated Press**

tice to the daily misery of a growing group of people. It is cruel, inhumane and cowardly."

He said the court was "very focused on euthanasia options, which are good, but so bureaucratic and only applied in the case of hopeless medical suffering with a lot of bells and whis-

les and conditions."

Another organization, the Dutch Association for a Voluntary End of Life, also criticized the decision, saying in a statement that it upheld a "situation in which the government deprives its citizens of the right to die with dignity at their own discretion." □

## Coral disease affecting Aruba causing concern

**ORANJESTAD – This week, during a joint press conference by Aruba National Park Foundation (FPNA) and the Department of Nature and Environment (DNM), information was given about coral disease that is causing concern for the local marine life.**

Giesbert Boekhoudt, director of DNM, indicated that for a long time already in the Caribbean there are different corals that are being affected by different kinds of disease, and they have been preparing for this for a long time.

Boekhoudt explained that they have the data of the investigation in the report by Carmabi which showed the situation of the corals; however, right now nature itself is showing that it is under pressure and there are hard corals in bad condition.

"For two to three months we have been preparing for this day to come. We prepared a system to address this in a standard way to inform the public and other stakeholders and people who use the ocean. There is great concern because other islands already got it, and the sea landscape is not looking good when the disease continues to spread", Boekhoudt commented.

Sietske van der Wal, interim manager of the Marine Park of FPNA elaborated on the disease and explained what can be done to reduce the pressure on the sick corals. Van der Wal explained that they noted different coral disease in the Caribbean region, including Aruba, and one of them can be very severe. They received some suspicious, alarming images, and went to investigate on the field.

The investigation took place in one area at Boca Catalina, where they carried out a survey of the corals. Part of it was a roving survey, where they count all the corals in one specific area and evaluate which



ones have disease and which ones don't. From the investigation it was discovered that about 50 percent of corals in the monitored areas have a disease.

Aside from this, Van der Wal indicated, they took different photographs of the coral to receive assistance from experts abroad to identify if this is Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease (SCTLD). But when they sent the photographs, it was still difficult to distinguish which specific disease was noted, and thus they had to find another way to find out the precise disease.

"Something very important that we had to do to distinguish between different diseases is to cover it for some time. This way you can see how in a short time, in this case four days between the two moments of observation, how fast the disease is progressing. Through photographs it could be observed that the disease on certain corals progressed a few centimeters in only four days. It is important to mention that coral grows very slowly, about 1cm per year, thus to lose a few centimeters in only four days is very severe", Van der Wal emphasized.

The photographs show that

the disease is progressing fast and if it keeps advancing on the corals at that speed, this means that the corals where the disease is now present can be completely lost within two weeks to one month. "This is something that we need to be worried about. But let's not lose hope, there is a lot that can be done that is part of the solution", Van der Wal indicated.

She called on everyone to help contain, or try to contain, the disease as much as possible. It cannot be completely contained because the ocean stays connected, marine life keeps coming, but the human being can make sure to not bring the disease from one area in Aruba to another, and this can be done through decontamination of everything that a person wears or uses.

When diving, snorkeling or fishing, it is necessary to decontaminate the equipment and tools used for these activities. It is also very important to let equipment and materials dry before going to another site. FPNA also asks everyone who goes in the water, in the sea, if they see something suspicious to point that out to FPNA so they can investi-

gate it right away, and also so they can have an idea of the spread of the disease around Aruba.

Van der Wal highlighted that it is not only disease that is impacting the corals; there is a lot of different impact on the corals and this needs to be reduced. "For example, the presence of boats in the ocean, boats with a lot of people on board. This is why it's important for them not to touch the coral, not step on the corals, they are living animals. Also to use the right sunblock, so make sure with sunblock that is used. Preferably this needs to be reef safe, and even better is to cover using clothing and avoid sunblock altogether", she pointed out.

She continued explaining that contamination coming from shore also needs to be reduced. There are many different ways how pollution enters the sea, including sewage, fertilizers and pesticides use in gardening. "We need to be a lot more careful of what we use and when we use it, because with rain, in the end everything ends up in the ocean."

She emphasized that it is important for the public to help with this. At the same

time, they are also trying to find more information, through experts, on how to establish the capacity to make like a "Noah's Ark" for corals that are still alive and not affected, to maintain a reserve so that when the disease has passed, corals can be placed back. Van der Wal indicated that this takes times, but it is a solution on which they can work and they are evaluating how to reach the necessary expertise as well as materials and funds.

Regarding other areas around Aruba, Van der Wal explained together with DNM based on the Carmabi report published a few years ago on the state of the corals, they search which areas have the most corals affected by SCTLD and these areas will become the main focus to investigate if the disease has gone further.

Finally, she added that soon there will be a call also for volunteers who can assist with monitoring these areas. She explained that FPNA and DNM together there is a lack of people to do the survey. There will be more information available soon for those willing to help identify and monitor this disease. □

# Bowls Noodle Bar invites you to a Happy Hour with a unique flavor



Bowls Noodle Bar recently opened at their new location at The Village, near the High Rise Hotels. To celebrate, they are launching their new Happy Hour from 9pm to 11pm every day.

Before the pandemic, Bowls Noodle Bar opened at the Hyatt by the airport, and was in the process of opening a second location at The Village when the pandemic hit. Due to the consequences of the pandemic, they decided to close the restaurant by the airport and open their new location at The Village. Their new location has been open for about six months to great results.

At The Village, night time is the best time. This is why they are now offering a daily Happy Hour, from 9pm to 11pm. It includes \$3 beer and \$5 cocktails.

Their cocktails are made in-house with a unique fusion of Asian flavors, for example, the popular purple Ube Mojito, with the flavor of traditional Ube, a Japanese dessert; the Blue Samurai with ginger flavor; and the refreshing Fruity Blossoms, with a flavor encompassing the Sakura, the famous Japanese Cherry Blossoms. You can try all these for only \$5 each during Happy Hour.

Fusion is at the core of the unique flavors of Bowls Noodle Bar, and this is expressed beautifully



fully in their traditional Japanese soups. They are the only restaurant in Aruba that has most of the noodles traditionally used, Udon, Ramen, and Rice noodles. Ramen noodles, served fresh, are a surprising flavor for those who are used to dried ramen noodles. They also have Jasmine rice for the rice bowls.

Their authentic soups are the highlight and star. Chef Warren explains that there are four main components to the soup: the broth, the noodles, tare, and the oil, and these are very important for the traditional Japanese soups. At Bowls Noodle Bar, they have a wide variety of flavors to cater to every taste, like the famous Pork Chashu. It comes with fresh ramen noodles, and it's the pride of Bowls Noodle Bar. Chef Warren says that the broth for this soup takes two to three days to make, and is made in-house, with fresh and delicious ingredients. They also cater to vegetarians and vegans,

with various options on the menu like tofu mushroom soup, vegetable gyoza, wonton, and fresh kimchi fermented at the restaurant.

The wok concept also allows you to create your own unique dish, choosing your base, protein, vegetables and sauce.

### Origin

The founders of Bowls Noodle Bar, Dexter Moreno and his partner Lai, opened their first location on Curaçao. They traveled to Japan to study Japanese Cuisine, and they fell in love with Japanese soup. Lai's parents are Chinese, and this is the start of the Asian-fusion flavors that are both surprising and delectable, combining Japanese, Chinese and even some Korean cuisine. Chef Warren was trained in these traditional flavors by the founders themselves.

They came to Aruba where Dexter approached some ex-colleagues in the industry to open a location on the island, and with a local team, opened Bowls Noodle Bar Aruba with a more extensive menu.

## December Specials **BOWLS**

NOODLE BAR & TAKE OUT

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <p><b>Monday</b></p> <p><b>20% OFF</b></p>  | <p><b>Tuesday</b></p> <p><b>20% OFF</b></p> | <p><b>Wednesday</b></p> <p><b>20% OFF</b></p> |
| <p><b>Entire bill Dollar to Florin Noodle Soups</b></p> <p style="font-size: x-small;">*applicable for the food, beer and wines</p> |   |   |
| <p><b>Thursday</b></p> <p><b>20% OFF</b></p>  | <p><b>Friday</b></p> <p><b>20% OFF</b></p>  |   |
| <p><b>Stir Fry Izakaya</b></p>  |   |   |

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Offer valid until December 31, 2022

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 📍 J.E. Irausquin Blvd 348 A, behind Fat Tuesdays

Scan

For Directions



Opening hours are Monday to Thursday 5pm – 11:30pm; Friday and Saturday 5pm – 12pm; and Sunday 5pm – 11:30pm. Come visit for great atmosphere, delicious flavors, and a Happy Hour to remember! 🍱





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## The Aruba Tourism Authority honor loyal visitors on the island

Recently, Kimberley Richardson of the Aruba Tourism Authority had the great pleasure to honor on of Aruba's loyal and friendly visitors as an Emerald Ambassador of Aruba. The emerald Ambassador is presented on behalf of the Minister of Tourism, as a token of appreciation and to say 'Masha Danki' to guests whom have visited Aruba 35 years and more consecutively.

The Emerald Ambassador certificate is the highest certificate that we present, and is only given to a few, making every part of this honoring ceremony even more special.

Ms. Richardson had the great pleasure to meet and honor **Mr. Charles Nemser & Mrs. Sharon De-Myer-Nemser** from Massachusetts, United States.

This couple stated that they love the island very much, especially for its year-round sunny weather, its nice sandy beaches and picturesque sunsets, its options of fun activities around the island & variety of foods, its safety, and Aruba's warm and friendly people whom have become family to them.

Ms. Richardson together with the representatives of the Divi Village Golf & Beach Resort presented



the certificate to the honorees, handed over some presents, and also thanked

them for choosing Aruba as their favorite vacation destination and as their home-

away-from-home. □

## The Aruba Tourism Authority honor loyal visitors on the island

Recently, Kimberley Richardson of the Aruba Tourism Authority had the great pleasure to honor Aruba's loyal and friendly visitors

as Distinguished Visitors of Aruba. The Distinguished visitor certificate is presented on behalf of the Minister of Tourism, as a to-

ken of appreciation, and to say 'Masha Danki', to the guests who visit Aruba 10 years and more consecutively.

Today I had the great pleasure to honor couple **Mr. Carol & Mrs. Denise Neptune** together with couple **Mr. David Pressley**

& **Mrs. Dominique Neptune**, all from the United States.

This wonderful family stated that they love the island very much, especially for its year-round sunny weather, its white sandy beaches and turquoise waters, its variety of foods, its easiness to move around the island, and Aruba's warm and friendly people whom have become like family to them.

Ms. Richardson together with the representatives of the Holiday Inn Beach Resort & Casino presented the certificates to the honorees, handed over some presents and also thanked them for choosing Aruba as their favorite vacation destination and as their home-away-from-home. □



## Another Treasure of Aruba's Beaches: Sea Glass!

**NOORD** - It is hard to imagine this happening today, but years ago people dumped all kinds of refuse straight into the ocean, including old cars, and their household garbage, which of course included lots of glass. Over the next 30 years the pounding waves cleaned the beach, by breaking down everything but glass and pottery. The pounding waves washed the trash up and down, back and forth. Tons of polished, broken glass pieces were created by the pounding surf. These smoothened, colored glass particles then settled along the sea shore in millions, and that is why you can find these beautiful and colorful pieces on the north shore beaches of Aruba.



Especially on the strip on white sand between the famous "Natural Bridge" and the huge red anchor close to "Grapefield" beach you will be able to find your own pieces of sea glass. The sea glass that was created is the product of a very long and interesting process. It can take anywhere from 10 to 30 years to make sea glass. The name for any piece of glass that finds its way to the ocean and tumbles around in the water long enough is "Sea glass."

The colorful pieces of glass are being used for decoration, handcrafts and jewelry! Once glass makes its way into the ocean, the glass is broken up into shards and is tumbled around in the water, where sand and other rocks act like sandpaper to

smooth out its rough edges. Sometimes as the sea glass is passed through fire, it becomes fire glass, the rarest of sea glass with certain inclusions, just like precious gems.

For years, the water beat against the different kinds of trash being dumped. Glass, household appliances and even motor parts were discarded on the beach. The waves and weather conditions wore down the overwhelming amount of garbage in the water, creating millions of beautiful smooth rocks.

It's hard to believe the short-sighted mistakes we were making that could have potentially ruined these beautiful beaches. But thanks to natural processes, the ocean transformed the trash into the

sea glass. Each colored gem on the beach has its own story.

The ruby red glass stones are typically from old car tail-lights.

Then, the sapphire rocks are the remnants of broken apothecary bottles. The most common and the easiest to find are the brown (Amstel & Polar beer), green (Heineken & Balashi beer) and clear glass which are the soft much loved "soft drink" bottles.

If you like to see the sea glass for yourself, and be in awe of the power of nature, rent a car or jeep and go explore our deserted beaches on the north side of the island. Make it a fun family day!



Even if we didn't mean to pollute the Beaches how we did, it is inspiring to see just how the earth can correct our mistakes.

Funny, how trash can change into treasures!

Everybody knows that you are not allowed to take local shells home, but the

people working at the airport have no problem you taking sea glass home. A few of those pieces make great souvenirs. You can place them in a wine glass or large bottle for decoration and every time you look at it a smile will light up your face thinking back of your unforgettable Aruba vacation! ☐



## Artisanal doll “Miss Aruba” returned to its home island



**ORANJESTAD – National Archeological Museum of Aruba, MANA received a fabric doll about 80 years old, from Mrs. Dolores Rutski. Back when Dolores, a resident of New Jersey was about three or four years old, she received the doll as a gift from her uncle, who brought it from Aruba.**

The doll has some details, like a traditional handkerchief tied on her head. Dolores doesn't remember every playing with the doll, she kept it and would only admire it.

Mrs. Rutski visited our beautiful island herself for the first time in 1973, to celebrate her honeymoon. She kept visiting Aruba for many years. She said that her uncle, Vincent Citarella was a marine on board of the commercial boat US Merchants during the Second World War. One of them was attacked by the enemy, causing the boat to sink. Only Citarella and one other marine survived the attack.

It was during her stay in Aruba last year that Dolores realized that Aruba was

also involved in the Second World War. She realized then the connection between her uncle, the doll, Aruba and the Second World War. Then she promised to come back with the doll and take a picture together in Aruba.

Dolores also began thinking about how, when she passes away, the doll will no longer have a home. In order to guarantee a home for her, could she gift the doll to a museum? This way she could visit the doll when she is here on Aruba.

Fulfilling her promise, Dolores took a picture recently with her doll at Bunker Bar. Even Dolores thought she could be nominated for “crazy old lady” for this act. The beauty of the doll caught a lot of attention. Humorously, Dolores comments that the doll might have tarnished a little but it has fewer wrinkles compared to her. Many people asked about the doll's name, and finally, she called it “Miss Aruba”.

Mrs. Dolores Rutski approached MANA with her desire to gift “Miss Aruba”

to the museum, ensuring a good home for her at her native island. This was accepted with a lot of love, since MANA already has two antique porcelain dolls, co-financed through UNOCA, which will be incorporated to the project “Keeping Heritage Alive through Time”. The new exhibitions that are part of this project are planned to be completed by mid-2023. This fabric doll, an artisanal jewel from last century, will be part of the developing exhibitions. □



**CROSSWORD**

By THOMAS JOSEPH

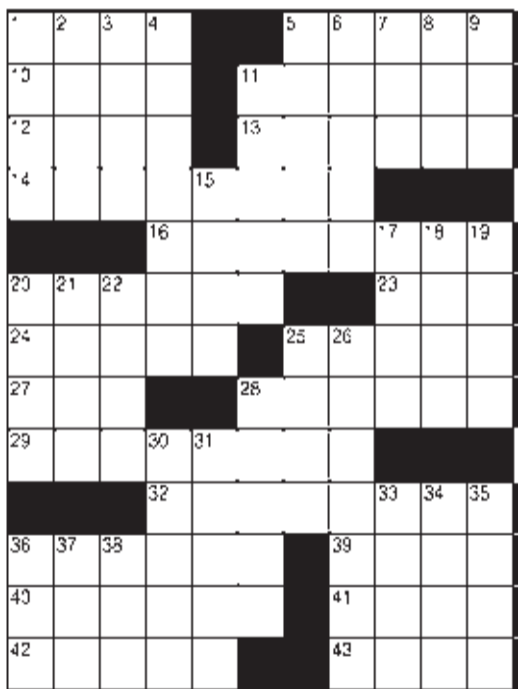
**ACROSS**      **DOWN**

- 1 Curving paths
- 5 Chases off
- 10 Butcher's wares
- 11 Appear
- 12 Cry from the crib
- 13 Diluted
- 14 Venue for testing out new jokes
- 16 Realistic
- 20 Missing
- 23 Meadow cry
- 24 Like some fences
- 25 Pen part
- 27 Yale student
- 28 Past and present
- 29 Off-road vehicle
- 32 Union demand
- 36 Relaxed
- 39 China setting
- 40 "X-Men" professor
- 41 "Why don't we!"
- 42 Blissful spots
- 43 Yard units



Yesterday's answer

- 19 Puts away
- 20 Like some
- 21 Island east of
- 22 Mix up
- 25 Small dog, for short
- 26 Partner's share, perhaps
- 28 Striped cat
- 30 Sawyer's creator
- 31 Diamond corners
- 33 "Got it"
- 34 Toy with a tail
- 35 Sunrise site
- 36 Reduce drastically
- 37 Wee bit
- 38 Genesis name



12-15

AXYDLBAAXR  
is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

12-15

**CRYPTOQUOTE**

DQTKU WKNS XQZPQKBTX, DJEQ  
W N K P N B T X , Y N M Q W N K  
PNSNKKNL. PYQ JSMNKPTUP PYJUO  
JZ UNP PN ZPNM GFQZPJNUJUO.

— TDHQKP QJUZZPQU

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: CHRISTMAS WAVES A MAGIC WAND OVER THIS WORLD. AND BEHOLD, EVERYTHING IS SOFTER AND MORE BEAUTIFUL.  
— NORMAN VINCENT PEALE

# The problems with using buy now, pay later to fund travel

By SALLY FRENCH of Nerd-Wallet

Book a flight or hotel room now, and pay it off later? It's an increasingly common trend in travel spending. Companies like American Airlines, United Airlines and vacation rental website Vacasa now offer the option to make reservations now and pay it back incrementally over time with "buy now, pay later" services.

Between 2020 and 2021, travel and entertainment purchases were the fastest-growing segment of the buy now, pay later phenomenon, according to a September 2022 report from the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. Buy now, pay later is an alternative type of short-term credit for online purchases offered by companies including Affirm, Afterpay and Klarna. The shopper immediately gets their purchase and pays it back later, typically in four installments or monthly payments.

While buy now, pay later has been popular for years in segments such as apparel and beauty, it's slowly growing in other areas, including insurance, education and groceries and travel is outpacing them all.

In 2019, just \$10 million was spent on travel-related buy now, pay later services. It grew to \$60 million in 2020 and \$800 million by 2021, logging an astounding 1,233% increase in one year and a 7,900% increase in two. But that growth isn't necessarily good. In fact, the CFPB warns it's a troubling trend.

**THE PROBLEMS WITH USING**



People shop for shoes in a Nike store on , Nov. 25, 2022, in New York. People shop for shoes in a Nike store on , Nov. 25, 2022, in New York.

Associated Press

**BUY NOW, PAY LATER**

Buy now, pay later can entail confusing terms, challenges in filing and resolving disputes, and strict requirements, like required use of autopay. And since it can encourage shoppers to take on more debt than they can afford, buy now, pay later may sometimes do more harm than good, many experts say.

**LATE FEES**

Many buy now, pay later services charge late fees, typically around \$8. According to the CFPB, 10.5% of buy now, pay later borrowers were charged at least one late fee in 2021.

**FORCED AUTOPAY**

Some buy now, pay later loans require autopay, which can be problematic for people who have insufficient funds in their connected payment accounts, as they could incur a late fee from the buy now, pay later company, as well as an overdraft fee from their bank.

According to the CFPB, 89% of 2021's buy now, pay later repayments were

made on a debit card, which opens up the possibility for overdrafting on accounts with insufficient funds. One in three buy now, pay later users reported overdrafting in January 2022, according to a survey from Morning Consult, a market research organization. Overdrafts typically trigger their own fee.

Repaying buy now, pay later purchases with credit cards isn't any better, even though some do it.

"This practice essentially using a credit card to pay off other debt is a sign of inability to repay," according to the Center for Responsible Lending and other groups in a March 2022 joint report.

**OVERSPENDING**

Buy now, pay later services have access to shoppers' purchasing data, which can then be used in future marketing campaigns likely encouraging even more spending. And that's not the only type of overextension that puts consumers at risk.

A 2022 Motley Fool survey found that reasons to use buy now, pay later included:

- To make purchases that wouldn't fit in my budget (45%).
- To borrow money without a credit check (21%).
- I can't get approved for a credit card (14%).
- My credit card(s) are maxed out (13%).

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|                |          |
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| Noord          | 527 3200 |
| Sta. Cruz      | 527 2900 |
| San Nicolas    | 584 5000 |
| Police Tipline | 11141    |
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| Taxi Serv. Aruba | 583 3232 |
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|                   |          |
|-------------------|----------|
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| American Airlines | 582 2700 |
| Avianca           | 588 0059 |
| Jet Blue          | 588 2244 |
| Surinam           | 582 7896 |

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# Sigourney Weaver, James Cameron float on in 'Way of Water'

By **JAKE COYLE**  
AP Film Writer

**NEW YORK (AP)**— To Sigourney Weaver, her friendship with James Cameron didn't really start on "Aliens," the 1986 film Cameron directed her in. It started after. "He was quite serious most of the time. He had a lot riding on that. England was all about Ridley Scott (the original's director) doing the next one," Weaver recalls. "It wasn't until we got to the Venice Film Festival where 'Aliens' was part of some program. We were having dinner afterward and I'm listening to Jim and I went, 'Wait a minute. You're funny? Where was this person all through those difficult months?'"

That their first movie as fruitful as the final product was wasn't the smoothest experience may have been partly due to Cameron's unconventional courtship of Weaver. When she wavered on returning as Ripley in the sequel, Cameron approached Arnold Schwarzenegger's agent, who also represented Weaver, with the idea of Schwarzenegger taking over the film series. It was a way, once word filtered back to her, to coax Weaver into signing on. The gambit worked. "The first few weeks on 'Aliens' was a bit rocky while we tested each other," Cameron says. "After that, we've been fast friends forever."

That long-running friendship and collaboration reach-



Director James Cameron, left, and Sigourney Weaver pose for a photo to promote the film "Avatar: The Way of Water" in London, Sunday, Dec. 4, 2022.

es an unlikely pinnacle in "Avatar: The Way of the Water," Cameron's long-awaited oceanic opus. Though Weaver co-starred in Cameron's original 2009 "Avatar," her character, Dr. Grace Augustine was shot and killed by the end of the film. In 2010, while Cameron was sketching out what would eventually become plans for four more "Avatar" films, he met with Weaver to suggest a novel idea of how she might be reborn on Pandora.

Weaver would come back in an entirely new role: Kiri, the 14-year-old biological daughter of Grace's avatar. In the film, which opens in theaters Thursday, Weaver plays the Na'vi character, adopted by Jake Sully

(Sam Worthington) and Neytiri (Zoe Saldana). It's not easy logic to parse out. What, exactly, are the reproductive capacities of avatars?

"I had to jump through a few fiery hoops to get her on this movie. Not that she was unwilling, but in terms of narrative logic," says Cameron. "OK, she's the daughter of the avatar of Grace Augustine, you know what I mean? So of course she looks like Grace. Makes sense, right? Oh, by the way, you've got to be 14 years old."

But the end result of Cameron's narrative logic is simple enough: Sigourney Weaver is back in the "Avatar" fold. And not only that, through performance capture she's

playing a wide-eyed teenage Na'vi who looks a little like an alien Winona Ryder. As Weaver likes to say, in science fiction, "Everything is possible."

"I know that no one but Jim would have cast me as a 14-year-old. As he said, people think I'm kind of serious and strong and all those things. He knows that that's just malarkey," says Weaver, smiling. "He said, 'This will be easy for you.'" It required a bit more work than Cameron made out. Like the rest of the cast, to film the movie's extensive underwater scenes, Weaver trained for the underwater performance capture work by learning how to hold her breath underwater for six minutes.

"Six and a half," Weaver corrects. Getting back into the headspace of a teenager also demanded some immersion. She spent time in high schools, she says. "I needed time to unearth my 14 year old."

"I was this tall when I was 11, which was excruciating," says the 5-foot-10 Weaver, the daughter of pioneering TV executive Pat Weaver and the British actress Elizabeth Inglis. "I still, at 14, spent half my time wanting to disappear. I think Kiri has some issues that are difficult for her. She's the adoptive daughter. She's very much part of the family, but she also has these things going on that she doesn't quite understand."

It's not a one-off performance, either. Cameron envisions big things for Kiri in future "Avatar" installments. He's already filmed the third film, begun shooting the fourth and developed the fifth. Fans of Weaver from "Ghostbusters," "Working Girl" and "Galaxy Quest" will get one more chance to grow older, again, with the 73-year-old actress.

"She's a very, very important character," Cameron says. "If we're lucky enough, in terms of enough financial success on the movie to break even and make it a proper business case going forward and we get to do 3' we've already captured everything with Sigourney for '3' and then '4' and '5.' □

Associated Press

# Comedian and actor Adam Sandler to get 2023 Mark Twain Prize

By **The Associated Press**

Over the years, The Mark Twain Prize for American Humor has gone to such luminaries as Richard Pryor, Carl Reiner, Whoopi Goldberg, Billy Crystal, George Carlin and Ellen DeGeneres. Next year, it's going to the guy who made us crack up as Happy Gilmore.

The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts said Tuesday that Adam Sandler would receive the

prestigious award at a gala on March 19.

"Adam Sandler has entertained audiences for over three decades with his films, music, and his tenure as a fan favorite cast member on 'SNL,'" said Kennedy Center President Deborah F. Rutter in a statement. "Adam has created characters that have made us laugh, cry, and cry from laughing."

The 56-year-old actor-comedian, who this year

starred in the well-received Netflix basketball drama-comedy "Hustle," has created a list of funny films, like "Happy Gilmore," "Billy Madison," "Grown Ups," "Big Daddy," "The Longest Yard" and "The Waterboy." His role as Howard Ratner in "Uncut Gems" garnered Sandler several nominations and awards, including winning the National Board of Review and the Independent Spirit Award. □



Jackie Sandler, left, and her husband Adam Sandler appear at the Governors Awards on Nov. 19, 2022 in Los Angeles.

Associated Press

# Alex Ovechkin reaches 800 career goals with hat trick

By JAY COHEN  
AP Sports Writer

**CHICAGO (AP)** — Soaked with beer and still wearing his No. 8 jersey, Alex Ovechkin held three pucks in his right hand as he posed for a picture with the rest of the jubilant Washington Capitals in the visiting locker room at the United Center.

Three pucks that added up to 800.

Ovechkin became the third NHL player to reach 800 career goals when he scored three times Tuesday night, touching off a wild celebration for his team and an appreciative Chicago crowd.

"Soon as it happened, kind of relief," Ovechkin said after Washington's 7-3 win over the Blackhawks. "Kind of happiness in general."

Ovechkin scored on his first two shots, beating Blackhawks goaltender Petr Mrazek 24 seconds into the game before stuffing one home on a power play with 11:46 left in the first period. The 37-year-old winger then completed his 29th career hat trick when he knocked Anthony Mantha's pass over a sprawled



Washington Capitals' Alex Ovechkin holds his 798, 799, and 800th career goal pucks in the locker room next to hats collected for his hat trick after an NHL hockey game against the Chicago Blackhawks Tuesday, Dec. 13, 2022, in Chicago.

Mrazek 6:34 into the third.

"When he got the first goal today, I was like, 'This is the night,'" teammate Evgeny Kuznetsov said.

The rest of the Capitals jumped off the bench to celebrate after the milestone goal, and hats rained down on the ice from the crowd of 16,181. Fans in Chicago then chanted "Ovi! Ovi!" drawing a wave

from Ovechkin.

The star forward moved within one goal of Gordie Howe for second all-time. Wayne Gretzky holds the record with 894 goals.

"It's a big number," Ovechkin said. "It's the best company (you can) ever imagine since you started playing hockey."

Ovechkin also praised the crowd for its response.

"Even in the warmup, I was feeling that energy right away," he said. "The fans watch me and the fans want to see that historical moment."

When it was over, Ovechkin jumped onto the ice one last time to salute the cheering fans. He then gave his stick to a boy wearing a Capitals jersey above the tunnel to the vis-

iting locker room.

Shortly after he got to the back, he was showered with beer by his chanting teammates. Goaded into making a speech, Ovechkin said it was special to accomplish the feat with the team.

"It was awesome," Washington coach Peter Laviolette said. "It was just awesome to be on the bench and be a part of it, a part of history."

Ovechkin has seven goals in his last four games and a team-high 20 on the season. His previous four goals were all empty-netters.

The Capitals play seven of their next nine at home.

"I think once he's going to be No. 1 he can have a sense of relief," Mantha said. "Until then, I think he's on the hunt, and that's what we love about him."

Ovechkin has been one of the NHL's most dangerous scorers practically since he got two goals in his debut with Washington on Oct. 5, 2005, against Columbus.

The 12-time All-Star has nine seasons with at least 50 goals, including a career-high 65 during the 2007-08 season. □

Associated Press

# Mbappe, France advance to World Cup final, beat Morocco 2-0

By STEVE DOUGLAS  
AP Sports Writer

**AL KHOR, Qatar (AP)** — France and Kylian Mbappé are headed back to the World Cup final for a much-anticipated matchup with Lionel Messi after ending Morocco's historic run at soccer's biggest tournament.

France beat Africa's first ever semifinalist 2-0 Wednesday, with Mbappé playing a part in goals by Theo Hernandez in the fifth minute and then substitute Randal Kolo Muani in the 79th.

France will head into Sunday's title match against Argentina looking to become the first team to retain the World Cup title since Brazil in 1962. Mbappé has the chance to ce-

ment his status as soccer's new superstar when he comes up against the 35-year-old Messi, who has dominated the game with Cristiano Ronaldo for the past 15 years.

There will be no team from the Arab world in the final of the first World Cup in the Middle East, a prospect that seemed nigh impossible before the tournament. Yet Morocco did break ground for Africa and generated an outpouring of pride among Arab nations after topping a group containing Croatia and Belgium and eliminating two more European powers Spain and Portugal in the knockout stage. They gave France a far-from-easy ride, too.

Hernandez's goal was the

first scored against them by an opposition player in the tournament the other had been an own-goal and came amid defensive rearrangement forced by injuries to Morocco's two best center backs. Nayef Aguerd competed in the warmup but didn't come out for kickoff, while captain Romain Saiss lasted only 21 minutes before limping off with a hamstring injury.

Mbappé helped to create the goal because his shot deflected off a defender and into the path of Hernandez, who let the ball bounce before driving a downward effort into the net from a tight angle.

Typically a defense-first team, Morocco was forced to come out and play and,

roared on by tens of thousands of fans who dominated the 60,000-seat Al Bayt Stadium, the team penned back France.

Jawad El Yamiq hit the

post with an overhead kick in the 44th minute and France's defenders had to make a number of last-ditch tackles in front of their own goal. □



France's Theo Hernandez, center, celebrates after scoring the opening goal during the World Cup semifinal soccer match between France and Morocco at the Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor, Qatar, Wednesday, Dec. 14, 2022.

Associated Press

# Mets set to shatter payroll records, soar to about \$350M

By **RONALD BLUM**  
AP Baseball Writer

**NEW YORK (AP)** — Steve Cohen's New York Mets are on track to shatter spending records in his third season as owner, boosting payroll to about \$350 million for purposes of the luxury tax and poised to pay a penalty of about \$80 million.

New York added veteran starters Justin Verlander and Jose Quintana plus reliever David Robertson and Japanese pitcher Kodai Senga while re-signing center fielder Brandon Nimmo.

"Everybody's talking about us and that's fine," Quintana said during a Zoom news conference Wednesday.



Houston Astros starting pitcher Justin Verlander speaks to media ahead of Game 1 of the baseball World Series between the Houston Astros and the Philadelphia Phillies on Thursday, Oct. 27, 2022, in Houston.

Associated Press

Coming off his third Cy Young Award, the 39-year-old Verlander became the second \$43.33 million pitcher in New York's rotation, joining for a two-year deal that matched the average salary of 38-year-old Max Scherzer.

Quintana, a 33-year-old lefty, got a \$26 million, two-year contract and Robertson, 37, a \$10 million, one-year deal to serve as a setup man for All-Star closer Edwin Díaz, who stayed for a \$102 million, five-year commitment. In addition, Nimmo received a \$162 million, eight-year contract, the Mets acquired lefty reliever Brooks Raley in a trade with Tampa Bay and reached a \$75 million, five-year deal with Senga, pending a successful physical. In all, the team committed \$461.7 million to six free agents, including five pitchers.

"We have done a lot of lifting and we've had a very fortunate investment from Steve and Alex Cohen in this club," general manager Billy Eppler said, referring to the owner and his wife. "The commitment is very evident here and the goals are very evident."

New York already was on track to set a luxury tax payroll record for 2022, at \$298.8 million, according to Aug. 31 projections by Major League Baseball, with final figures still being compiled. Mets spending for the tax payroll rose from \$186 million during the last fully played season of the Wilpon and Katz family ownership in 2019 to \$208 million in 2021, the first season after the pandemic. They will pay the tax for the first time this year.

MLB and the players' association agreed last March to a new fourth threshold dubbed the Cohen Tax "It's better than a bridge being named after you," the owner quipped. The fourth threshold starts at \$293 million next year and the Mets will pay a 90% rate as a second offender a projected \$50 million tab as of now. □

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